

## FROM THE EDITOR

## A LONG WAY JUST TO SIT

By Dan Wotherspoon

## SUNSTONE ARIZONA!

*A huge vote of thanks to all those who organized, sponsored, hosted, volunteered, spoke at, and attended the 2006 Sunstone Arizona Symposium! We can't wait to do it again next year!*

The inaugural Sunstone Symposium Arizona was held 14 January on the Arizona State University campus. The program, which featured fourteen sessions and more than thirty participants, was co-organized by the dedicated and talented team of DOE DAUGHTREY and LAURA L. BUSH. All symposium expenses were underwritten by extremely generous donations from Arizonans H. MICHEAL WRIGHT and the KENNETH E. AND BECKY L. JOHNSON FOUNDATION, which allowed Sunstone to bring in several additional speakers and offer FREE admission to all attendees—a wonderful boon, and something that more than one hundred people greatly enjoyed! The symposium enjoyed tremendous support from the start from the ASU religious studies faculty, especially department chair JOEL GEREBOFF and administrative assistants PAT HUTTON and SARAH MACIAS. Symposium attendees were warmly welcomed in remarks by professor KENNETH MORRISON, who also participated in several sessions. The symposium was also graced by a handful of volunteers who quietly did all the things that keep events like this running, most especially TOM KIMBALL of Signature Books, who worked feverishly at the book table and in any other capacity needed while still being his usual likeable self, and JOHN DEHLIN, who was the indispensable guru of all things audio-visual.



Tom Kimball, Newell Bringham, and Eduardo Pagán discuss recent biographies of Joseph Smith



Audience during one of the Sunstone Arizona plenary sessions

MY TRIP TO Arizona and interactions with members of the ASU faculty during the Arizona symposium were very nostalgic for me. I'm a 1990 graduate from Arizona State's M.A. program in religious studies, and my experiences there represent an important crossroads in my life. It marks the period when I took my first stumbling steps as a scholar. Even more than that, however, it marks (if I can borrow language from ritual studies, my main focus at ASU) my entrance into what I have come to regard as a sustained immersion in *liminality*.

"Liminality" is a term brought into the ritual studies lexicon some forty years ago by

Victor Turner, an anthropologist whose groundbreaking work on the individual and social dynamics of ritual processes is still widely studied. Turner draws the term from "liminal," the label that French anthropologist Arnold van Gennep gives to the middle phase of what he calls *rites de passage*, the rituals that "accompany every change of place, state, social position and age." "Liminal" has its roots in the Latin *limen*, which means "threshold."<sup>1</sup>

For Turner, liminality designates the state of being for "threshold people," those who are in transition between two worlds. In rites of passage, these are often the initiates—the

ones a society has deemed ready to move from the world of childhood into adulthood and who accordingly must undergo testing, as well as receive training in the *gnosis* associated with their new social roles.<sup>2</sup> This they receive at the hands of societal elders, shamans, or others recognized as instructors in the ways of being, knowing, and acting in the realm into which the initiates are to enter.

Turner describes initiates during this transition time as being "neither here nor there," "betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, [and] convention." Because it lacks official status (and is therefore not bound by traditional rules), this threshold space between worlds is often viewed as dangerous. It is a space of refashioning, where an initiate's persona is "reduced or ground down" in preparation for its being "fashioned anew and endowed with additional powers." It is a state of potentiality, sometimes likened to being in the womb, in darkness, in the wilderness.<sup>3</sup>

In many ways, graduate school in and of itself is a liminal state. To be in graduate school is to be in a threshold stage between typical schooling and one's entering the "real world." It is a place and time in which one learns the deeper gnosis of her or his chosen discipline—instruction often involving a great deal of deconstruction and the unlearning of much that had been taught in earlier stages of instruction. Here one learns to access and understand the very foundations and theoretical underpinnings of a discipline and its branches, without which one could never do genuinely creative work advancing knowledge in that field.

My Arizona State experience thrust me into liminality in those ways, to be sure. But even more than initiating the threshold time before my full-blown, adultish, breadwinning-type career had to begin, my choice to study religion placed me abruptly into a strange no-man's land within Mormonism.

My faculty guides inducted me skillfully into the secrets of the academic study of religion, and some also modeled for me the religious life of a scholar who is also a committed member of her or his own religious tradition. But I felt very alone as a Mormon. Where were my tribe's elders and shamans? By virtue of the new tools I was gaining and the new light in which I was coming to see certain ideas and commitments that uphold my tradition, I was suddenly neither here nor there, floating betwixt and between recognized LDS social structures. Whose journey could model for me a refashioned, reintegrated life at the other end of this rite of passage?

I N two recent editorials, I've written at some length about the "complexity" that developmental theorists and others claim one must pass through before matters of faith begin to look and feel "simple" again. There is much in Turner's analysis of the statuslessness and the undoing and refashioning that characterize liminality which could shed light on the nature of this complexity (as well as the reasons it is considered so dangerous). But there's another aspect of Turner's work in unpacking the richness of liminal existence that I'd like to focus on here: his concept of "communitas."

Through his studies of rites of passage, Turner noticed that the initiates undergoing the processes together developed a strong bond with each other. Stripped of all previous demarcations of status, "ground down to a uniform condition" through the processes deemed necessary to prepare them for reintegration into society in their new roles, those sharing the trials of liminality tended to develop an "intense comradeship." By their very nature, societal roles create hierarchy and ranks; they divide us from each other and subtly work against our awareness of shared humanity with those around us. Turner's thesis is that because such divisions disappear during the threshold state, liminality makes possible a natural state in which feelings of deep affinity for each other resur-

face: a bond he labels "communitas."<sup>4</sup>

My experiences at Arizona State were my first immersion into the liminal realm (what Jeff Burton would call "the Borderlands") with regard to Mormonism. Initially, it was a very scary, very lonely place to be. Not until I was introduced to the conversations taking place in the pages of *SUNSTONE* and *Dialogue* and began connecting with fellow liminoid persons at Sunstone symposiums did I begin to feel connected to the vitality of Mormonism again. At Sunstone, I felt my first hints of communitas, a connection and sense of a fellowship with others undergoing similar de- and re-constructions. For me, at least, it was also through Sunstone that I first found tribal elders and shamans who modeled the kind of deep spirituality and openness to wonder that I came to recognize as characterizing the new being I hoped to become at the end of my passage.

Sunstone symposiums as gatherings, and *SUNSTONE* and *Dialogue* as magazines, are in no way cleanly captured by Turner's insights. Unlike a clearly delineated cohort of initiates who take part in rites of passage as a group, those of us whose journeys bring us into and out of orbit around Sunstone and *Dialogue* come and go at different times. We enter our liminality with different histories and temperaments and with different expectations of what the simplicity (or faith) we desire will

look like. Though all are welcome to share their insights and journeys, the symposiums and magazines we produce and read do not serve to level all social differences nor create a perfect atmosphere in which deep comradeship will spontaneously appear. But amidst the chaos and the chatter—and even the voices whose journeys make them skeptical of ever emerging from the confusion with a sense of peace about their life and home within Mormonism—*some* communitas does arise. Out of shared liminality, notwithstanding the diverse shapes it takes, deep and abiding bonds *do* form.

O N a few occasions, I've told the story of something my then-ten-year-old daughter Hope said while helping put together pre-registration packets the night before one of our Salt Lake symposiums. As she had been working to separate name badges from the sheets they're printed on, she'd been quietly noticing how many people were coming in from out of state to attend. Finally, upon encountering the badge for Cornelis Van Ree, a symposium regular who lives in the Netherlands, she exclaimed, "Boy, people sure come a long way just to sit!"

I'm sure that to a ten-year-old, Sunstone symposiums do look an awful lot like just sitting. And what could be more boring than that? But those of us who attend know better.

Although a great deal of sitting is involved, so very much more is going on. We've heard a personal story that goes right to our heart, telling us we're not alone. We've come to understand a new way of framing our daughter's early return from her mission. We've glimpsed new ways we might reconnect with the Savior and begin thinking about the Atonement again. We've laughed affectionately at our tradition's idiosyncracies and mourned with those who have been deeply wounded by certain institutional actions. We've learned that there was once a fourteenth article of faith, that black men held the priesthood long before 1978, that LDS women once blessed the sick and that their administrations often worked better for "the sisters had more faith than the brethren." We've met a joyous soul whose life and way of being is a testimony that faith and mind can be truly and



"Maybe we'd better lay off the Old Testament for a while . . ."

happily integrated; it is a testimony of experience that carries with it a gravitas that makes it unforgettable, something that will work deeply upon us during times we feel like throwing our hands in the air and giving up on ever again finding meaning in our life and peace with God.

**T**HIS year's Arizona symposium has come and gone. Dallas and Southern California are on the horizon. Our four-day Salt Lake gathering is less than six months away. Seattle will follow a few months after that. Contact us. Let's organize others!

NOTES

1. Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977), 94. Originally published, Aldine Publishing, 1969.
2. Rites of passage that accompany the onset of puberty are very common in certain cultures, but they in no way exhaust the category. Rituals that surround marriage (the transition from being single to a new life as a couple), death, and menopause are also common and can be classed as rites of passage. So can ceremonies that celebrate the elevation of persons to leadership positions or the transition to other new roles (such as missionary or military service).
3. Turner, 95.
4. *Ibid.*, 96-97.

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